



## PRISONER CORRESPONDENCE PROJECT

### **Expectations and Guidelines: Letter writing as allies to trans and queer prisoner struggle**

This is a list of general expectations and guidelines, as well as some general ideas to keep in mind, that we ask all non-incarcerated participants in the project to look over, and read before getting involved. This document has been written in dialogue with members of the project on the inside, and is workshopped periodically with folks currently inside, and with the collective of the Prisoner Correspondence Project.

This list is by no means exhaustive and is intended as a rough guide to begin corresponding. Please don't hesitate to be in touch with us if you have any questions or concerns, or if you have specific feedback about the project, or about this document. We're hoping this doc will be helpful for you in navigating queer and trans prisoner support.

#### **INITIAL CONTACT**

-- Please only initiate correspondence with the individual if you are committed to corresponding on a more or less longer-term basis. For many prisoners serving long or even life sentences, receiving one or two enthusiastic letters from someone promising to correspond regularly, but failing to follow up with further correspondence can be incredibly disappointing. This need not be an intense time commitment; letters can be as long or as short as you want them to be, and **please be upfront about the regularity that you will be able to write** - if it's only once a month, say so. Don't make promises at risk of creating false hope, and be clear with your level of commitment.

-- Please confirm with us once you successfully get in touch with your penpal. Some of these letters are being forwarded after considerable delay. If you don't hear back from the person you're corresponding with within 4 to 6 weeks, it is possible that they have been transferred or released. Get in touch with us so we can help try to locate their current contact information. (You might also have some success by calling the prison to ask for their forwarding address, or new ID number. Check to see if you were using a chosen name, or a name that they might not be listed under.)

-- Some of the letters we receive from incarcerated individuals ask to be paired up with someone who identifies along certain lines; though we try and do this when we are able, we can not commit or ensure that they will be paired up with someone who exactly meets their request. This is clear in the description of the project that they receive initially. If you are concerned that you might not meet their request, or don't identify / present along the lines they expressed preference for, the best thing to do is check in with them first.

#### **PRISON MAILROOMS**

-- While we generally encourage outside penpals to take their lead from their inside penpal, it is also important to note that **mail going into prisons is screened and read more frequently than mail coming out of prisons**. Don't assume that just because your penpal disclosed personal information in their letter that it's alright to discuss it freely from then on. If unsure, ask which topics they feel comfortable talking about, and whether it's alright to reference information they reveal in previous letters.

-- In your first letter to the person you're corresponding with, you **should ask what specific restrictions that their prison or detention facility has outlined**. ie.: no photos, no photocopies, no newspaper clippings, no hardcover books, no stamps, etc. These restrictions are highly arbitrary and differ from prison to prison, so be sure to ask. It's a good idea to:

- Write your first letter on plain paper, in a plain envelope (no stickers, no photos, etc) to increase the chances of your first letter getting through, and to facilitate making initial

contact, until you find out about the specific restrictions of the prison mailroom you're dealing with.

- Make a copy of your first letter in case it doesn't get through right away. This is sometimes the case because people are transferred frequently, etc.
- Include your first and last name as the return address. Most prisons in Canada and the US will not give a letter to an inmate if there is not a full name with the return address. If you do not want to disclose your personal name, including the name of the project (Prisoner Correspondence Project), or using a pseudonym should be fine.

-- When corresponding with transgender, transexual, gendervariant prisoners, and addressing them using a chosen name, be aware that some prison mailrooms will refuse to forward the letter to the prisoners unless it's addressed to them using their birth name or the name they were charged under. **Be sure to clarify this with your penpal prior to doing this.** Alternatives can include using BOTH names on the envelope. Alternately, you could address the envelope using their birth name, and the letter using their chosen name. Though this isn't ideal, sometimes it is the only way to get the letter to them.

#### **SAFETY & OUTNESS ABOUT BEING GAY, QUEER, TRANS**

-- Don't assume your penpal is out in prison as being gay, queer, trans, etc. Many people aren't out because it can open them up to administrative abuse, and violence. **Following the guidelines below will help you to avoid unintentionally outing someone without their consent.**

- Avoid using a chosen name on the envelope without explicit permission. Check in on your first letter about this to see if they have a chosen name, if it is recognized by the prison, if you can use it on the envelope, if you can use it on the letter, or if you should avoid using it altogether.
- Check in with them on your first letter and ask whether or not it is okay to send them resources, materials, etc, that are gay, queer, or trans themed or focused.
- Keep in mind that envelopes are seen and handled by many prison workers and other prisoners. **Avoid including any markings on the envelope, including a return address, or return organization name, that might out your penpal.** (ie. when sending resources from LGBT groups, etc).

#### **SAFETY & OUTNESS ABOUT HIV STATUS**

-- Many people inside are not out about their HIV status because it can open them up to violence, harassment, medical neglect, and surveillance. As stated above, because ingoing mail is screened with more regularity than outgoing mail, **even if your penpal discloses their HIV status to you in a letter, this doesn't mean it's always safe for you to bring it up in following letters.** Be aware of this; if you're unsure, check in with them.

#### **THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND / POINTS TO INFORM YOUR LETTER WRITING**

-- Be conscious of trying to follow ideas of solidarity with respect to letter writing as opposed to a charity model. This isn't about condescending notions of 'helping' prisoners, but rather the acknowledgment that our own struggles as outside trans folks and queers are intricately wound up with prisoner liberation. **Don't pretend to know their situation if you don't.** Communicating in this way will compromise effective communication and can create unfair power dynamics. That being said, this is an ongoing learning process for us all. If you want more information about navigating these issues (solidarity, support, privilege, etc) you can check out our website for additional reading, or get in touch with us directly.

-- In the context of a prison system where trans and queer and gay folks are massively over-represented, it is good to keep in mind the increase in surveillance around sexuality trans and gay and queer folks are subject to, especially when they're in prison, or have a history of incarceration, for instance, hysteria concerning queers and underage folks. Be sensitive to this, use your best judgment, and be in touch if you have specific questions.

#### **SETTING BOUNDARIES**

-- If you feel ill-equipped to support your penpal on any front, whether it's in terms of finding them the resources they need, or in terms of emotional support, please **don't hesitate to seek the support you need** in doing this. You can post a message on the googlegroup, the forum on our website (once it's set up), or send us an email directly.

-- If things don't work out with your penpal, or you decide you can no longer continue the correspondence for whatever reason, that is completely your decision, and we can match you up with someone else, no

questions asked. **If you do decide to end correspondence with your penpal though, please let us know so we can find someone else to pair them up with.**

-- Many letters received by our project have a sexual or romantic tone. This is in part because sex, gender, and sexual identities are foregrounded in the project. To date, situations that have come up where people feel uncomfortable with sexual content have been dealt with easily by **clearly setting boundaries, and expressing your intentions from the outset of your correspondence.** In the initial project description all inside penpals receive, we outline the project's intention as one that is for "friendship and support". (Ultimately, it's up to you and your penpal where you take the direction of the correspondence. You should definitely not feel obligated to de-sexualize your letters, or to avoid letters with sexy content.)

#### **NEGOTIATING YOUR OWN SAFETY**

-- Always keep in mind that it is very possible that all incoming letters will be read and screened. **Do not include any incriminating information about yourself, or the person you're corresponding with.** Correctional services (in particular Correctional Services Canada) have been known to share sensitive information with other arms of law enforcement. **Be mindful not to disclose your immigration status or other information that might compromise your safety.** If unsure, err on the side of caution. That being said, our intention is not that you be completely self-censoring; we understand this project as a political act, so if you and your penpal have established what you are each comfortable discussing, we definitely don't discourage folks involved discussing their politics, but that we should all exercise caution.

-- You should also communicate your own needs in corresponding, and the specific information you do and do not want disclosed in letters. This might include your own history of incarceration, parole conditions, or added surveillance you are under as a result of this, etc, that you think your inside penpal should know. This way they can be better informed in terms of what they should and should not be communicating in their letter, in the interest of not compromising either of your safety. (If you have specific questions about this, we have some access to folks who do legal work, or are familiar with Canadian case law, so be in touch.)

**While we understand that this might be a lot of information to take in all at once, many of the points brought up here are also issues that you get used to after a while. As a collective that coordinates this project, we are here to function as a resource for you in navigating these issues and obstacles. Don't be shy! Get in touch if you have any feedback, ideas, or concerns.**

[www.prisonercorrespondenceproject.wordpress.com](http://www.prisonercorrespondenceproject.wordpress.com)  
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